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Varia

***Tangping* (Lying Flat): Subjectivation, Lifestyles, and Voice among Young Chinese**

***Tangping* (Restons couché(e)s) : subjectivation, styles de vie et opinions parmi la jeunesse chinoise**

JEAN-LOUIS ROCCA

Sciences Po, CERI

Email : jeanlouis.rocca@sciencespo.fr

Abstract: Since the 2010s, new cultural phenomena have emerged in China among the young generation of people born during the “Chinese Miracle”, all challenging the norms and values that the previous generation helped to create. The most interesting of these is *Tangping* (lying flat), a buzzword that was generated online. It expresses a desire to escape the hyper-competitive culture that has become established in both education and the workplace, as well as the “responsibility ideology” which encourages people to work hard, marry, have babies, and consume. It is not only middle-class young people who are lying flat. All social categories are affected, but the way in which it is practised varies depending on people’s social status. There are many ways to participate in the phenomenon, ranging from a complete change of life to a simple sign of distinction, and many “Tangpingists” only aspire to have a temporary “rest” from this exhausting society. *Tangping* has no organisation and no leaders. However, it poses a challenge to the Chinese Dream – the goal of building a prosperous society and making China a powerful country.

Keywords: Chinese Dream; competition; consumption; middle class; migrant workers; *Neijuan* (involution); psychology; responsibility; social media; *Tangping* (lying flat).

Résumé: Depuis les années 2010, de nouveaux phénomènes culturels ont émergé en Chine parmi la jeune génération née pendant le « miracle chinois », remettant tous en question les normes et les valeurs que la génération précédente avait contribué à créer. Le plus intéressant d'entre eux est *Tangping* (restons couché(e)s), un terme né sur Internet et qui est devenu viral. Il exprime le désir d'échapper à la culture hypercompétitive qui s'est imposée tant dans l'éducation que dans le monde du travail, ainsi qu'à l'« idéologie de la

responsabilité» qui encourage les gens à travailler dur, à se marier, à avoir des enfants et à consommer. Les jeunes de la classe moyenne ne sont pas les seuls à « *tangping* ». Toutes les catégories sociales sont concernées, mais la manière dont il est pratiqué varie en fonction du statut social. Il existe de nombreuses façons de participer à ce phénomène, allant d'un changement complet de vie à un simple signe de distinction, et de nombreux « *tangpingistes* » aspirent seulement à un « repos » temporaire loin de cette société épuisante. Le *Tangping* n'a pas d'organisation ni de leaders. Cependant, il représente un défi pour le « Rêve chinois », qui consiste à construire une société prospère et à faire de la Chine un pays puissant.

Mots-clés : classe moyenne ; compétition ; consommation ; médias sociaux ; *Neijuan* (involution) ; psychologie ; responsabilité ; Rêve chinois ; travailleurs migrants ; *Tangping* (Restons couché(e)s).

There can be little doubt that Chinese society is being permeated by radical new cultural phenomena¹, driven mainly by young people born between the height of the “Chinese Miracle” (the late 1990s) and the end of the 2000s. These phenomena are associated with evocative and intriguing buzzwords such as *Sanhe Dashen* (三和大神, “Sanhe gods”), *Bailan* (摆烂, “tanking”, “to stop striving”), *Tangping* (躺平, “lying flat”), *Sang* (丧, “mourning”, “dejected”), *Diaosi* (屌丝, “losers”), *Jiucai* (韭菜, “garlic chives”), “996” (working 9am-9pm, 6 days a week), and so on.² What they all have in common is a critical approach to life and society that contrasts with the expectations held by the previous generation. Of these trends, *Tangping* (“lying flat”) will be at the core of this paper for three reasons. The first reason is that it has attracted a very large audience and continues to influence people’s behaviours and discourse. Secondly, because it bridges two periods: the time when the norms and values created by the Chinese economic miracle emerged and flourished, and the present day, when these are being called into question. Thirdly, the term *Tangping* refers directly to the “body” of individuals, which lies at the centre of power relations in any modern society ruled by capitalism. The basic metaphor is clear (Chinese people were previously standing up, and are now lying flat), but its extended significance is more brutal: owing to exhaustion, their bodies went from a vertical position, which is easily subject to power and production, to a horizontal position, which does not lend itself as readily to social control.

Most of these criticisms emerged in the mid-2010s, but at that time they remained confined to the internet and a small group of people. It was only during and after the country’s lengthy Covid-19 lockdown that they went viral. From my own perspective, as a China scholar working on the “making of the Chinese middle class”, this change came as something of a

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² Other phenomena are discussed in Brossard (2025, 48-56).

shock. After less than 20 years of the commodification of labour, land, and money³ – in other words, since the introduction of categories of market economy⁴ – the next generation has apparently rejected the newly established set of norms and values. Admittedly, from the mid-2010s, I, along with some of my Chinese colleagues, had noticed a certain malaise among the middle classes,⁵ as well as among migrant workers aspiring to join their ranks⁶ – a malaise which, as we shall see, is not unrelated to this cultural turn. It seemed that many people were finding it increasingly difficult to remain in or access the middle class. However, the speed of change came as a great surprise. Another surprising aspect is that *Tangping* is not a cultural “movement”. This is why I use the terms cultural “phenomenon” or “trend”. As we shall see, there are many ways in which *Tangping* is manifested, most of which are not socially visible. There are no reliable figures that would allow us to measure the phenomenon, but there can be no doubt that this, along with similar phenomena, have taken on a huge importance in the public and private spheres. The topic dominates social media, as well as newspapers, academic research, and private discussions, with everyone trying to understand how such a radical questioning of the foundations of the new Chinese society could emerge.

This paper will begin by describing the “cultural turn” with which these different buzzwords are associated, with a particular focus on *Tangping*. As a social attitude found among the younger generation, *Tangping* amounts to a rejection of the norms and values that their parents and sometimes grandparents had accepted, shaped, and identified with since the end of the 1990s, as a means of climbing the social ladder. These include participation in constant competition to obtain the best possible education and job, and increasing pressure to fulfil social duties such as getting married, having children, consuming, and developing oneself. In other words it is about being a neoliberal subject. Recently, these norms and values have come to be perceived as extremely costly in terms of personal satisfaction, and these costs seem to be increasing even further as competition intensifies and opportunities become more scarce. What is the point of participating in this exhausting system that brings less and less satisfaction? This is why people want to “lie flat” and withdraw – whether temporarily or permanently, partially or totally – from “normal society”, and to live a quiet life without any sort of responsibility.⁷ The second step will be to analyse the transition from one era to the next, from one type of subject to another. Why and how does the previous generation not only identify with, but also contribute to shaping the new neoliberal subject? Why are young people rejecting this new Chinese “subject”, and how do they resist the social constraints that are brought to bear on them?

In order to answer these questions, we must revisit the discussion of the relationship between individuals and society within the Chinese context. The mainstream approach considers that Chinese individuals are striving to break away from traditional family and community structures in order to enjoy more personal freedom and opportunities for personal development.⁸ From this perspective, individuals are assumed to be constrained by two forces:

³ Polanyi, 1944.

⁴ Chinese people were “put to work” (Rocca, 2006).

⁵ Li Chunling was probably the first to notice this trend (Li, 2016, 32-39).

⁶ Rocca, 2017a, 2022a, 2022b.

⁷ According to most interviewees, France and China, 2022-2025.

⁸ Yan, 2009; Matthyssen, 2024, 279-302.

the authoritarian state and, perhaps more importantly, Confucian values.⁹ It has been suggested that *Tangping* is at odds with Confucianism, because the latter's values are based on effort, self-exertion, and filial piety.¹⁰ However, Confucian values are very rarely mentioned in interviews or in academic research in China. Instead, interviewees frequently point to the culture of overwork, competition, consumerism, and the imperative for self-development in order to make oneself more "bankable" – all norms and values that emerged during the Chinese Miracle. As for young people's attitudes towards authoritarianism, there is a strong temptation to consider these cultural trends as the expression of an inexorable desire of "society", or a part of it, to overhaul the political system. Just as some scholars previously considered that the regime might be overcome by private entrepreneurs,¹¹ civil society activists,¹² laid-off state employees,¹³ or more recently the middle class,¹⁴ we could view those who claim to have a *Tangping* attitude as potential gravediggers of the CCP. I have previously criticised these statements.¹⁵ With regard to *Tangping*, the criticism is not directed against the authoritarian state itself, but rather against living and working conditions in a society in which capitalist conditions of production prevail.

Nevertheless, these attitudes pose an indirect threat to social and political stability. They reflect, in a very critical manner, on the very process of becoming a subject of one's own life in present-day China. More specifically, they pose a potential long-term threat to widespread commitment to the "Chinese Dream". Xi Jinping used this term on 29 November 2012, shortly after his appointment as General Secretary of the CCP, and it is viewed as an ambitious project that he wanted China to achieve during his leadership. Although it has been only vaguely defined, it can be summarised as the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the building of a "society of moderate prosperity" (*xiaokang shehui*, 小康社会). According to Xi, China needs young people who "cherish the glorious youth, strive with pioneer spirit, and contribute their wisdom and energy to the realisation of the China Dream".¹⁶ In other words, young people should be dynamic, positive, efficient, pragmatic, and hard-working. New cultural phenomena seem to express exactly the opposite conception of life. Consequently, even though the authorities do not appear to be under threat, they are still concerned, particularly as the trend of lying flat has even been embraced by some civil servants!

The third part of the article will focus on the early reactions to *Tangping*. In the beginning, *Tangping* was viewed as a discourse of affluent people, characterised by egoism, hedonism, and individualism. Given what we have just said about the China Dream, it is not surprising that the government's reaction to this was very negative. What is more surprising is that some scholars and intellectuals who are generally quick to criticise certain aspects of Chinese society were also hostile towards what they perceived as a lack energy and ambition among the young to participate in a changing society. As for the general public, most people, including those

⁹ Hansen et Svarverud, 2010; Wang, 2022, 7-16.

¹⁰ Hsu, 2022, 20-29.

¹¹ Nee and Peng, 1994, 253-296.

¹² Stubbe Ostergaard, 1989, 28-41.

¹³ Lee, 1998, 3-33.

¹⁴ Rocca, 2017a.

¹⁵ Rocca, 2003, 2009, 2017b.

¹⁶ Xi, 2013.

who were critical felt shocked to see their norms and values challenged by young people, or even their own children.

However, as we shall see in the fourth part, the reality of the *Tangping* phenomenon is much more complex than the initial reactions suggest. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to move beyond the mainstream approach to the relationship between the individual and society. It is certainly true that the attitude of *Tangping* is generated by negative individual experiences in the education system and the labour world,¹⁷ but the phenomenon is also the result of profound changes to the structure of Chinese society. As Norbert Elias argues in *The Society of Individuals*, we cannot first define the individual and then analyse their relationship with society, or vice-versa. The individual is socially and historically constructed, and society is the result of social interactions between individuals. Moreover, in modern societies, individuals are both more powerful than they once were, and also more strongly influenced by the rules enacted by institutions and social relations.¹⁸ Owing to what Elias terms “the civilising process”,¹⁹ they are more powerful because acting as an individual is now the norm, yet they are also more strongly determined owing to the increasing power of state institutions and social relations.

According to Foucault, it is power relations that define norms and values, not the other way around. Subjectivities are shaped by power, and individuals participate in the process through submission, acceptance, discontent, resistance, and rejection. Power relations take place in everyday spaces such as families, through social affinities, and in the media, as well as through institutions such as schools, prisons, factories, offices, and hospitals, which use specific techniques of power (*disciplines*) to render individuals docile.²⁰

Form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize, and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.²¹

In general, the use of violence is unnecessary. For this to succeed, however, “disciplines” must respect one condition, which is that the individuals must “understand” that it is in their interests to obey:

Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are “free”. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behaviour are available.²²

¹⁷ Zheng *et al.*, 2023, 932-948. Most of my informants have negative memories of their time at school. Interviews, France and China, 2022-2025.

¹⁸ Elias, 2001 [1987].

¹⁹ Elias, 1969.

²⁰ Foucault, 1975.

²¹ Foucault, 1982, 777-795, 781.

²² *Ibid.*, 777-795, 790.

How can we characterise the attitude of *Tangping*? In fact, *Tangping* can be viewed not only as a practise, but also as a state of mind, a lifestyle, a posture, an imaginary, and sometimes an ethic. For some, lying flat means breaking with society; for others, it simply means taking more time to rest. Furthermore, behaviours and discourse associated with *Tangping* are sometimes contradictory, and often ambiguous in their relation to mainstream norms and values. People who associate themselves with the *Tangping* phenomenon (whom we shall refer to as “Tangpingists”) do not convert to a new life, but rather remain embedded in the capitalist society that has emerged. They continue to enjoy the benefits of the prosperous era. Most are university graduates, whose parents possess accumulated wealth. They have an ambiguous attitude towards consumption and level of income, sometimes taking advantage of the possibility that exists in modern-day China to enjoy prosperity, and sometimes trying to live a stress-free life while carrying out only occasional work.

Finally, given that institutions and the web of social relations were implicated in *Tangping* from the outset, it is relevant to consider how the phenomenon is perceived and dealt with by society at large, and more specifically by institutions. Over time, the perception of the phenomenon has changed, and many institutions have started to appreciate its significance. By “institutions” I mean not only “the Party”, the “central government”, and “local government”, but also the institutions directly involved in the socialisation of the younger generation, such as the media (including social media), the higher education system, and the academic field.

Tangpingists reflect critically on the process of becoming a subject. Consequently, drawing on Albert Hirschman’s distinction between “exit”, “voice”, and “loyalty”,²³ it is worth exploring what young people want, or are trying to say, when they express their discontent. The responses of the authorities largely depend on the answers to the following question: is *Tangping* a form of exit from rejected norms and values, or a means of voicing opposition to these and of introducing new ones? Or is it a way of remaining loyal to the regime while adapting to a new situation?

The regime’s response to *Tangping* so far has been very different to its responses to previous contentious phenomena. Unlike in the 1980s, the regime is not being challenged directly. The diffuse nature of this form of discontent, the diversity of Tangpingists’ backgrounds, the way it propagates through social networks, and its impact on everyday lives all make political responses to the phenomenon more complicated. What narratives and policies are being proposed by institutions in order to counter this cultural turn? And on what knowledge could institutions base their actions and discourse?

To answer these questions, I have relied on three main sources of information. Firstly, Chinese academic literature provides a very wide range of high-level research on the topic, mostly based on fieldwork and interviews. However, this source of information is ambivalent: on the one hand, it provides extensive and detailed information on the new cultural phenomena, but on the other hand, it is important to remember that scholars have only limited academic freedom to choose their own research topic, and that their research is directly sponsored by higher education and research institutions. Scholars, and especially early-career scholars, have no choice but to respond to these state-sponsored projects. Consequently, academic articles must be viewed both as contributing to academic knowledge and as providing a

²³ Hirschman, 1970.

semi-official response to the phenomenon, since they are supposed to provide the authorities with knowledge. However, it would be a mistake to assume that research has only a “propaganda” purpose. When faced with such a new, confusing, and dangerous phenomenon, the state needs to understand what is happening in Chinese society. Once again, knowledge is power. Scholars must “tell the truth”, but they should not go too far in their critique, and they should also, at least partly, use the official discourse to which they are contributing.

The second source consists of interviews with Chinese people. Together with Camille Salgues and Tang Lingyue, I conducted 25 recorded, semi-structured interviews. The interviewees, who come from all walks of life and different parts of China, are students, or professionals who studied in France and decided to stay because of a job opportunity or because they had married a French national.²⁴ In addition, during three periods of fieldwork, from 2023 to 2025, I conducted 62 non-recorded interviews, mostly with students and academics, but also with ordinary people in various Chinese cities.²⁵ The conditions of the interviews varied considerably. The semi-structured form was rarely used. They were more like free discussions and informal discussions, sometimes quite short (half an hour), sometimes much longer (up to two hours).

The third source of information is social media, which is especially important given that it is the place where most of the buzzwords emerged and continue to be discussed. *Tangping* was known in the 2010s, but became viral when a man named Luo Huazhong posted a text entitled “*Tangping* is righteous” (*tangping jishi Zhengyi*, 躺平即是正义) on the internet forum Baidu Tieba in April 2021. The author explains that he quitted his factory job and now lives a very simple life, working only to earn money to survive. He is spending his life “lying flat”, avoiding any kind of responsibility, cycling, travelling, and reading philosophy. The post triggered a huge number of reactions.

A CULTURAL TURN: QUESTIONING THE NORMS AND VALUES OF THE CHINESE MIRACLE

Tangping is part of a large constellation of new cultural trends.²⁶ Zhu Ying and Peng Junqi have even coined the acronym DST (*Diaosi, Sang, Tangping*) to emphasise the lineage between *Tangping* and different buzzwords.²⁷ Two things they all have in common is that they emerged from the internet and social media, and that they give a very pessimistic view of Chinese society.

One phenomenon that became popular in 2018 is “Buddhist-like” (*Foxi*, 佛系) culture, which refers to escaping from the world and letting nature take its course, inspired by Buddhist principles. The word comes from an article published in a Japanese magazine in 2014. The term “Buddha-like male” (*Fonanzi*, 佛男子) refers to a man who focuses on his own interests

²⁴ As part of our ethical commitments in the context of the DWARC project, we must strictly respect the anonymity of the interviewees. For this reason, I cannot provide information about them.

²⁵ Ethical rules prevent me from disclosing details about the identities of interviewees.

²⁶ Chen and Cao, 2021, 181-191; Gulotta and Lin, 2021.

²⁷ Zhu and Peng, 2024.

and work, does not want to spend time with women, and has few desires.²⁸ Another buzzword, *Sang* (“mourning”), which was originally a term related to funerals, has been appropriated to convey various negative emotions such as defeatism and disillusionment.²⁹

Bailan (“tanking”, or “to stop striving”) comes from a tactic in professional basketball of losing in the short term to increase the chances of winning in the long term. In the Chinese context, however, *Bailan* people have entirely given up trying to make things better.³⁰

Tangping itself is particularly associated with three other buzzwords: “996”, *Neijuan* (“involution”), and “garlic chives”. 996, meaning “from 9am to 9pm, 6 days a week”, refers to the work culture promoted by the big Chinese companies, in violation of the PRC’s national labour laws. It also refers to the expectation that workers will work harder and harder, accepting increasing competition and the despotic power of the boss. This last point was particularly emphasised by many young interviewees.³¹ The power relations prevailing in public administration, business, and even in universities provide power-holders with nearly unlimited, and often meaningless control over subordinate workers: bosses can call workers during the weekends or at night, employees can be fired or promoted (or passed over for promotion) by a simple decision of their supervisor, and workers are supposed to remain in the office until after the boss has left, even if there is nothing to do. Competition between people is constant. According to interviews of Chinese people working in French companies, the difference between the two contexts in terms of style of management is huge. The interviewees highlighted the existence in France of trade unions, defined working hours, limits to managers’ power, and clear rules for competition and promotion, and some even concluded from this that France is a sort of “lying flat country”.³²

This disciplinary situation (in the Foucauldian sense), based on fierce comparison and competition, is not limited to the workplace, and most students and professionals complain about similar rules that subjugated them during their years in the education system. To paraphrase Mao, to be a Chinese child is not a dinner party. About fifteen years ago, a funny story went viral in China, which joked that competition for academic success would soon begin in kindergarten. According to several interviewees, the story is no longer funny at all, as competition now does indeed begin in kindergarten. As one advertisement proclaims: “We will nurture your kid if you come; we will nurture the competitors of your kid if you don’t come.”³³ *Neijuan* (“involution”) is a term that refers to a situation in which a system, be it technological or social, having reached a certain final form, becomes increasingly complex internally while no longer progressing. The boom in higher education has led to increased competition in schools and universities between graduates and postgraduates from middle-class backgrounds. Young Chinese find that they spend years coping with the pressures of the educational system, achieve the highest results they can, and yet finally arrive nowhere.³⁴

²⁸ Song, 2018, 41-45; Bu *et al.*, 2018, 105-111, 61.

²⁹ Dong, 2017, 23-28.

³⁰ Ma and Zhang, 2023, 175-178.

³¹ “I do not want to return to China to work. The management system is too awful” (Interview, professional).

³² Interviews, professionals, 2022-2025.

³³ Pang, 2022, 81-100, 86-87.

³⁴ Ma and Zhang, 2023, 175-178; Wang and Chen, 2022, 13-21; Gong and Liu, 2019, 1-21; Li and Shang, 2024, 119-128.

People feel that, instead of progressing, they are going round in circles and remaining in the same social positions. They feel that they are making a lot of effort for nothing. The situation then becomes irrational and absurd, and the rational conclusion is that it is better to give up. The game is not worth the candle.³⁵ The price of entry into the ranks of the middle class – the Holy Grail for most Chinese – is becoming increasingly costly for the younger generation. Rising property prices and healthcare costs, and the obligation for parents to spend a lot of money on their child's education, are making the Chinese Dream harder to achieve.³⁶ Similarly, the new generation of migrant workers has been confronted with precarious unemployment prospects. Not only have their dreams of joining the middle class disappeared, but the economic slowdown is also eating away at the little they are able to earn.

When Luo Huazhong, who triggered *Tangping* fever on social media, says that “a good society is one in which you can go up and go down” (*Yige haode shehui shi keshang kexia de*, 一个好的社会是可上可下的), he is pointing to what many Chinese sociologists observe in their research: a sharp decline in the opportunities for upward social mobility. *Tangping* is the outcome of the phenomenon of “class solidification”: it is extremely difficult to climb the social ladder when those in prominent social positions are firmly protected. As a result, people are now more likely to experience descending mobility, rather than ascending mobility.³⁷

Another buzzword, “garlic chives” (*jiucaai*, 韭菜) is a popular metaphor used for criticising the way the economic system treats people. Pang Laikwan explains:

[It is] used by the Chinese people themselves to mock their voluntary participation in the jungle of greed and brutality [...]. The garlic chive is an extremely adaptive plant and is capable of enduring both cold and hot weather. It is basically perennial, so that once the seeds are planted, they will regrow every year. It is also very easy to manage, to the extent that farmers just need to cut the plants with a sickle [...] when they are tall enough, because it is both easy to plant and nutritious [...]. Chinese medicine also praises its high medicinal value for treating abdominal pain, diarrhoea, haematemesis, snakebite, and asthma.³⁸

This metaphor reminds us of the Marxist idea that, in capitalism, workers are interchangeable, and all have the same value. Once one generation of chives has disappeared, another will grow in its place. In contemporary China, it is also used to refer to ordinary Chinese people who are constantly lured into investing in all kinds of economic activities, only to see their investments disappear into the system. Pang also points out that, in this metaphor, “corresponding with these garlic chives is the sickle [*liandao*, 镰刀], which is used to describe the economic and political forces feeding upon the fortunes lost by individual investors”.³⁹ Finally, the metaphor is used to describe professionals who become neoliberal subjects, having been convinced that

³⁵ The concept of “involution” was first introduced into China by the sinologist Philip C. Huang in a book published in Chinese in 2000, and in English in 1985. In fact, it comes from a theory developed by Clifford Geertz (1963), in which “involution” is conceived – in opposition to evolution – as a situation in which an increase in labour input results in a diminishing return of output.

³⁶ Rocca, 2022a.

³⁷ Zhang and Cheng, 2020, 62-69; Zhang and Song, 2024, 116-123; Lin, 2023, 142-149; Chen and Cao, 2021, 181-191.

³⁸ Pang, 2022, 81-100, 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-100, 83.

it is glorious to become an entrepreneur, even though many of them fail to succeed and are replaced by others.⁴⁰

Involution, 996, and garlic chives have emerged in a specific social context: that of young middle-class people who are either still students or who have just started their professional careers. 996 refers to office work, a world in which people are directly under the gaze of managers.⁴¹ Involution was first illustrated using a few pictures taken in the second half of 2020 showing students using a computer while cycling, indicating the intense time pressures they are under.⁴² These pictures, which first circulated among students at Tsinghua University and Beihang University, epitomise the irrationality of the culture of competition. “Garlic chives” refer to capitalist practices that consist in replacing “dead” workers by other ones picked up among the “reserve army of workers”.

FROM ONE NEW SUBJECT TO ANOTHER

In the late 1990s, a new type of subject emerged in China, based on the principle of individuals contributing to collective success while pursuing their own interests. These interests are not only material, but also include a sense of personal achievement. The new Chinese subject should be a healthy and energetic worker, an avid consumer, a homeowner, a car-owner, a husband or a wife who supports their family and maintains a perfect living environment, a parent who is willing to spend money to give their child the best education possible, and a son or a daughter who is ready to take care of their elders. In short, it is a matter of sacrificing oneself to become affluent, respectable powerful, and contribute to China’s rise.⁴³ This combination of neoliberal ideology and nationalist discourse, which is not specific to China,⁴⁴ proved to be very appealing, particularly to people who previously had no prospect of social mobility.⁴⁵ Until the mid-1990s, very few people could hope to become property owners or university graduates, or to improve their circumstances by migrating to new industrial regions.⁴⁶ There was no reason to refuse this new life when it seemed so easy to change one’s identity and become, or at least expect to become, a “middle-class” subject,⁴⁷ while contributing at the same time, and without any specific effort, to China’s prosperity. This subject is very different from the one that became the norm after 1949, but one important aspect of socialist society remains: the ethics of responsibility. Although it is no longer a matter of sacrificing oneself for the construction of socialism, people continue to feel that they have responsibility for society as a whole, as well as for their families. In an unpublished study of students at Tsinghua University, which I supervised in 2010, it was observed that students were

⁴⁰ Interview of a young businessman who “lost a lot of money because I trusted that it was possible to succeed in this society”.

⁴¹ Chen and Hong, 2024.

⁴² Interviews, China, 2023, One of the photographs in question can be consulted here: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17530350.2023.2246988>.

⁴³ Rocca, 2017a.

⁴⁴ Bayart, 2012, 2017; Hibou, 2015.

⁴⁵ Rocca, 2005.

⁴⁶ Rocca, 2017b, 2003, 2009.

⁴⁷ Rocca, 2017a.

willing to work hard for China's prosperity. Similarly, 90% of them planned to get married after they had got a job and bought an apartment, and then start a family and have a baby.⁴⁸ People were not led to conform to this new model through violence or trickery, but rather participated willingly in the process of subjectivation. Migrant workers moved to coastal regions to improve their own social position, while urban dwellers seized opportunities to attend university, and professionals sold their talents on the new labour markets. All of these people expended a great deal of energy in reshaping themselves as new subjects and in contesting living and working conditions. As part of this process, they even went on strike, launched petitions, and started protest movements, which led to the introduction of new laws, regulations, and policies aimed at protecting their interests.⁴⁹ In striving to take advantage of the situation, they challenged power relations and sometimes reflected critically on the process of subjectivation. For example, in the 2000s, many people who had bought new homes claimed that they belonged to a new, prestigious social group. "Homeowners" fighting against greedy and dishonest real estate developers and property management companies, and campaigning for legal protection, have become one of the most emblematic examples of this phenomenon.⁵⁰ While these struggles differ from "anti-authority struggles" as defined by Foucault,⁵¹ they nonetheless challenge power effects and establish new power relations in the process of forging new identities.

In contrast, the *Tangping* new generation has started to reject this new subject, including the associated propensity to protest publicly. They want to be able to decide for themselves what kind of life they will live, free from social constraints,⁵² and they engage in "anti-authority struggles":

They do not look for the "chief enemy" but for the immediate enemy. [...] These struggles are not exactly for or against the "individual" but rather they are struggles against the "government of individualization" [...]. But they are also an opposition against secrecy, deformation, and mystifying representations imposed on people [...]. Finally, all these present struggles revolve around the question: Who are we?⁵³

The interview with Luo Huazhong by the Chinese website of *The New York Times* is a good example of how we can draw parallels on this matter.⁵⁴ He lives in a small village near Hangzhou, growing vegetables, raising chicken and ducks, often eating noodles, sometimes with the addition of an egg. He often goes swimming in a river, and reads philosophy books from time to time. He considers that "lying flat is the truth of life". According to him:

Young people should strive. Everyone knows this. But what is the point of striving? What do I gain? [...] What is the ultimate value I pursue? [...] I believe that China has always discussed issues of ethics but has never paid attention to the spiritual aspects of human beings, that is, the issue of human subjectivity. So, I took the opportunity to put forward my thoughts, drawing on the ancient Greek sophist movement and the idea that "man is the measure of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Rocca, 2009, 2017b.

⁵⁰ Shen, 2012.

⁵¹ Foucault, 1982, 780-781.

⁵² Qiu and Ding, 2024, 51-63.

⁵³ Foucault, 1982, 780-781.

⁵⁴ Chen, 2021.

all things” [...]. Today, development is not for the sake of humanity, but rather humanity develops for the sake of these things – it’s been inverted. These steel-and-concrete structures, these data-driven office buildings, these cold, valueless objects have become the sole pursuit of humanity [...]. Young people have thoughts of their own, they would like to change many things in the world. That is not the case of people with vested interests. Why do people keep having children even though there are already so many of them? [In Chinese society] the ultimate value that is pursued is merely the formation of family relationships through marriage and childbirth, but in most parts of the world, this is only a personal choice. [...] I can live at a slow pace and freely express my thoughts – that’s enough for me. I don’t approve of those materialistic, hedonistic things. People who work with these things may not think about it; they just bury themselves in their work [...]. They always ignore these very real issues and just talk about the same old things – that young people should strive to succeed [...]. What do I get out of it? Where do I stand spiritually? What is the ultimate value I am pursuing? [In this society] none of these questions are addressed.⁵⁵

Most of the young people I interviewed had a very similar discourse. They want the opportunity to decide for themselves, but they are also very concerned about broader social issues: the future of humanity, climate change, the zero-waste movement, gender inequalities, and so on. They attack “everything which [...] forces the individual back on themselves”,⁵⁶ including consumerism and pure hedonism.

HOW DID INSTITUTIONS INITIALLY RESPOND TO THIS CULTURAL TURN?

Paradoxically, the media and some prominent scholars initially viewed the new subject as a kind of amoral hedonism emerging among young members of the Chinese middle class. “Lying flat is shameful” (*tangping shi kechide*, 躺平是可耻的) became an anti-*Tangping* slogan on social media. For example, Li Fengliang, an assistant professor at Tsinghua University’s School of Education, wrote, “lying flat is an irresponsible attitude, sorry parents, sorry taxpayers who work hard”,⁵⁷ and the businessman Ding Lei declared, “even for 10 billion I will not lie flat”.⁵⁸ Some academic articles also emphasised the negative impact of these attitudes of retreat, arguing that these individuals, by focusing on personal matters, risked weakening social ties and progress towards political change. These trends were associated with depression, passivity, and anxiety, and young people were accused of having a “low-desire” (*diyuwang*, 低欲望) attitude.⁵⁹ Some scholars expressed the same opinion to me in interviews: “How can you change the country if you have no desire?”⁶⁰

The initial response from the authorities was even more severe. The fact that some of China’s youth were refusing to respect the new norms and values introduced by the reforms was viewed as a danger: China needs young people who are energetic and enterprising.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Foucault, 1982, 781.

⁵⁷ Li, 2021.

⁵⁸ Lin and Gao, 2021, 78-84, 80.

⁵⁹ Wu and Sun, 2024, 12-25.

⁶⁰ Interview, scholar, 2023-2025.

According to Xi Jinping, “it is necessary to prevent the stagnation of the social classes, unblock the channels for upward social mobility, create opportunities for more people to become rich, and form an environment for improvement in which everyone participates, avoiding involution and lying flat”.⁶¹ Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the nationalistic *Global Times* tabloid, stated the matter even more clearly: “Young people are the hope of this country. Neither they themselves, nor the country, will allow them to collectively lie flat.”⁶²

The State Council’s 2022 White Paper about youth portrays Chinese young people in an idyllic light. Its discourse draws heavily on revolutionary and nationalist rhetoric to justify the pursuit of economic and social development. Youth is viewed as the most active and vital force in society, and therefore as the vanguard in the quest for national rejuvenation. It even considers that young people should play a crucial role in terms of political change,⁶³ although in reality, as in many countries around the world, senior officials and political representatives tend to be older people.

Some scholars, in their analysis of the phenomenon, draw on the Chicago School’s insights into subcultures, and the cultural studies approach that emerged from the Birmingham School. Such articles generally begin by drawing a catastrophic psychological and moral picture of completely dissocialised young people, whose lives are empty. This phenomenon can only be solved, they argue, through a series of actions aimed at curing young people. Ma Xuemin and Zhang Caihong argue that, to fight against *Bailan* attitudes, it is necessary to increase the supervision of the internet and social networks, strengthen ideological and political education, improve theoretical learning, and establish correct values.⁶⁴

The influential sociologist Sun Liping has a different view: “the primary issue now is not debating whether resignation is right or wrong, nor is it criticising those who have resigned themselves from a position of privilege. Rather, it is to understand why they have come to this state of resignation.” Nevertheless, he argues that, “for young middle-class or white-collar workers in slightly better circumstances, lying flat stems from shattered hopes, from the asymmetry between effort and reward [...]. Lying flat requires not just some capital, but something else: the memory of hope once held, its shattering, and its irretrievable loss.” As such, “lying flat” is “unlikely to occur at the bottom of society”.⁶⁵

A GENERATIONAL PHENOMENON

Given the scale and the multifaceted expression of *Tangping*, as revealed by academic research, the perception of the phenomenon has gradually become far more lenient. According to Hsu Han-Yu, “in the public’s view, effort-making in an unfair workplace is not *unconditional* [...],

⁶¹ Xi, 2021.

⁶² Hu, 2021.

⁶³ State Council, 2022.

⁶⁴ Ma and Zhang, 2023, 175-178.

⁶⁵ Sun, 2021.

effort making is encouraged [...] but *Tangping* is not a sin”.⁶⁶ In other words, when faced with a low-return situation, lying flat is an understandable response.⁶⁷

The first adjustment to the initial perception of the phenomenon came with the recognition, by scholars, that *Tangping* is not limited to the “affluent class”. It seems that people from all walks of life may “lie flat”: students reacting to the “involution” of the social system; hotel workers facing a negative work environment (long hours, high pressure), leading them to withdraw from work;⁶⁸ and teachers, who are placed under intense pressure not only by the administration but also by parents. Social media are full of discussions about the situation now faced by teachers: they must maintain a WeChat discussion with parents, who can then call them at any time, and in secondary schools they are harassed by the administration, which wants to see their pupils get the best marks.⁶⁹ In universities, young scholars are pressured to respond to national research programmes, and to publish articles so as to maintain or improve the status of the institution.⁷⁰ Professionals are also expected to take part in non-voluntary activities in which they have no interest. For example, medical doctors are forced to participate in civic and political activities or heavy administrative tasks not directly related to their work.⁷¹ In this case too, *Tangping* could be a reasonable response.

Some groups of young gay migrants “have come to identify themselves as *guabi*, a term derived from an internet meme, and which is in line with the *Tangping* movement”.⁷² Metaphorically, *gua* (挂) means “hanged to death”, while *bi* (逼) means “vagina or bitch”. They have given up any hope of climbing the social ladder, and identify with the lumpen proletariat. Doubly stigmatised, as migrants and homosexuals, they are fully aware that any attempt to succeed would require a disproportionate effort for extremely uncertain results.

Even more significant is the group of people known as *Sanhe dashen* (“Sanhe gods”), which has gradually emerged since 2005. On 6 May 2018, the Japanese television station NHK aired a documentary film titled “Chinese youth earning ¥1,500 a day at talent markets”, which drew attention and discussion to a group of young migrants living in Shenzhen. Two Chinese scholars, Tian Feng and Lin Kaixuan, published a book about this group, based on their fieldwork,⁷³ which observed that *Sanhe dashen* are a group of mainly male migrant workers who have turned their precarious situation into a lifestyle. They were initially attracted by the prosperity of the city of Shenzhen, as the most iconic example of China’s economic miracle. Many of them were sent by recruitment agencies (one of these agencies, in the Longhua district, is called “Sanhe”) to labour-intensive factories, where they were exploited and paid low wages. After a while, finding themselves trapped there, most of them decided to refuse to live what is considered a “normal life”. They became homeless, eating a basic diet of noodles, “working one day, playing three”, and spending their leisure time in gambling dens, which remain open day and night.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Hsu, 2022, 20-29.

⁶⁷ Yin *et al.*, 2023, 25-32; Yu and Shi, 2024.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-32.

⁶⁹ Interviews, teachers and parents, 2023-2025, Cheng *et al.*, 2024, 1-11.

⁷⁰ Interviews, scholars, 2022-2025.

⁷¹ Tang, 2023.

⁷² Gong and Liu, 2019, 1-21.

⁷³ Tian and Lin, 2020.

⁷⁴ Ding, 2023, 77-80; Liu and Zhang, 2021, 19-22; Zhang and Cheng, 2020, 62-69; Wen, 2018, 12.

The authorities themselves use the term *Tangping* to criticise the attitude of some mid-career civil servants. While most civil servants can progress in the hierarchy until their thirties, thereafter it becomes much more difficult. They encounter a bottleneck that stalls their career, whatever their efforts. This problem is so serious that the authorities have extensively expressed their concerns about it in the media.⁷⁵

The second adjustment from the initial perception is that it is now recognised that the phenomenon of *Tangping* cannot be reduced to an attitude of egoism, hedonism, or escapism. In terms both of practices and discourse, it is actually a complex process of subjectivation. Students and young professionals alike are producing new sets of behaviours, new lifestyles, and new ways of conceiving of the place of individuals in society. Within its discourse, one theme is concerned with the new capitalist practices that deprive individuals of any control over their time. Tangpingists want to reshape the relationship between work and leisure, public and private life, and the individual and collective realms. As one interviewee said to me, “lying flat is, for me, a way to reconquer time”.⁷⁶ Another one claimed, “we are not low-desire people, we want to satisfy our desire differently”.⁷⁷ This cultural turn also has an effect on the transition to adulthood: “I want to decide for myself, so I need time to get to know what I want to do. So, for the time being [at 30 years old] I’m not taking on social responsibilities, I’m staying in a state of waiting”.⁷⁸

Thirdly, it is now recognised that *Tangping* is not exclusively a form of exit, or a way to escape a difficult reality; it is also a way of speaking out against increasingly difficult social constraints. This is particularly evident in the case of students and young professionals. *Tangping* cannot be reduced to a demand for more room for manoeuvre for individuals; instead, it creates a sort of virtual, and fluid, social movement, which individuals can identify with. *Tangping* discourse is legitimised by discussion taking place in mass media and on the internet (particularly social media). Individuals are found at both ends of this process, their views and behaviours being magnified and legitimised by online viral discussions.

Far from being the effect of a “transcendental process” in which young people suddenly become depressed, negative, and anxious, and therefore reach for solutions to their individual situation, the way in which *Tangping* subjects are constructed is determined by current social conditions. This cultural turn is, in this respect, a generational phenomenon. For urban dwellers, the slowdown in economic growth, the crisis in the real estate industry, and the decline in manufacturing have significantly reduced employment opportunities. Even in a city like Guangzhou, where it was previously easy to make money through business, students now dream instead of becoming civil servants to escape the rat race.⁷⁹ This phenomenon may be linked with the development of *Tangping* behaviours within public administration. Young people want a stable job, even if it is a boring one. Similarly, in the past, few students aimed to continue their studies to doctoral level; it was more lucrative and exciting to enter professional life after completing a bachelor’s or master’s degree. Now, the number of applicants for PhD programmes has surged, since this offers a way of postponing entry into the state of

⁷⁵ *Renmin ribao*, 2024.

⁷⁶ Interview, 2023–2025.

⁷⁷ Interview, student, 2023–2024.

⁷⁸ Interview, student, 2022–2025.

⁷⁹ Interviews, scholars, 2023–2025.

“involution”.⁸⁰ As a Chinese student told me: “for my parents it was simple, they had a road to follow; we have no road. We must find our own way, we do not know how”.

Finally, it seems that one particular event contributed to the emergence of *Tangping*: whereas many of the previously mentioned phenomena started and developed before the Covid-19 lockdown, *Tangping* itself surged in popularity in 2021. Consequently, we can hypothesise that the long period during which the “rat race” came to a halt could have prompted many people to change their minds. Although my informants did not raise this point by themselves, they agreed that it was a contributing factor when I drew their attention to it.⁸¹

In short, *Tangpingists* express both the suffering experienced by the second generation of middle-class people as a result of educational and work-related pressures, and the difficulties experienced by Chinese society in maintaining the path to success. This subjective perception cannot be separated from an objective reality: that, for the new generation, the price to pay for reproducing their parents’ lifestyle is too high. However, this generational phenomenon is not immune to the effects of social stratification.

A HIGHLY FRAGMENTED PHENOMENON

People belonging to different social classes cannot practise *Tangping* in the same way. Even within the middle class, diverse situations coexist. For children of the affluent middle class, it is possible to renounce upward mobility without risking social downgrading (*déclassement*, in Bourdieu’s terminology),⁸² since parental wealth provides a form of safety net. For these financially comfortable young people, there seems little reason to work hard for things they already have. As long as they maintain a good relationship with their parents, lying flat remains a symbolic act, and has no negative consequences for them. With no child to raise, and no elders to take care of, they can rely on their parents and benefit from the latter’s social and cultural capital.

The difference with migrant workers or less affluent middle-class people is huge. Students from second- or third-rank universities, office workers from small or medium-sized cities, and less wealthy middle-class young people are not on an equal footing, in terms of their “safety net”, with elite students at Tsinghua University from affluent families in Beijing or Shanghai, or from the families of civil servants.⁸³ Most students face a choice between accepting bad or temporary jobs, or going back home and living a very simple life. Interviews tend to show that students from elite universities rarely choose to lie flat, because they do not find themselves in the same situation of involution, but instead consider that they have a real possibility of succeeding.⁸⁴ This does not mean, however, that their life is easy. According to interviewees, elite students are subjected to intense pressures, but of a different nature. These students who gained access to the best universities were previously the top students in their secondary schools, but now they find themselves competing with the top students from many other schools, with the risk

⁸⁰ Interviews, scholars, 2023-2025.

⁸¹ Interviews, France and China, 2023-2025.

⁸² Bourdieu, 1984.

⁸³ Interviews, scholars, 2023-2025.

⁸⁴ Interviews, scholars, 2023-2025.

of ending up at the bottom of their class. Cases of depression are numerous, and failure results in them losing face not only for themselves, but also in front of the university, their parents, and their friends.⁸⁵

The process of subjectivation is different among migrant workers: while they too create new subjects and new lifestyles, they do so within an almost opposite set of conditions. The case of *Sanhe dashen* is emblematic. When they were children, some were “left behind” in the countryside by their parents, who went to the cities to earn money. When they grew up, they followed in their parents’ footsteps, moving to cities to work and earn money, and striving to stay there in order to realise their urban dreams. Unfortunately, their low levels of education and skills, together with their limited economic and social capital, confine them to the lower end of the labour market. Daily wages in the formal sector are low, and working conditions are very poor (a minimum of 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week). However, their new lifestyle allows them to stop working at any time and, in periods when there is greater demand for labour, they are treated relatively well by management and paid higher wages. In periods when the situation is less favourable, they indulge their passion for video games. This status gives them a sense of freedom. They are known as “gods” because, like gods, they do not have to worry about their survival. But gods cannot go back to a normal life. Without a formal job and some professional prospects, they cannot have romantic relationships and get married. They are poorly placed on the marriage market, which is characterised by an imbalance between men and women (with more men seeking a partner), and by women’s preference for upward marriage. Moreover, many entrepreneurs are reluctant to hire workers “who look like to *Tangping*”.⁸⁶ Consequently, the feeling of freedom is balanced by feelings of depression, incompetence, and uselessness.⁸⁷

This ambivalent situation is perpetuated by a social and economic micro-environment that is well adapted to them, creating a sort of ghetto. They have at their disposal internet cafes, luggage storage, small supermarkets, low-quality hotels, cheap shops selling new or second-hand clothes and other daily necessities, and street vendors where they can buy noodles for almost nothing. It is said that you can survive on 50 yuan (approximately €6) a day in Sanhe. There are also many employment agencies which make it very easy to find occasional work. Many of the *Sanhe dashen* have broken away from their families. Some are former prison inmates, or have left home because of gambling debts. Their situation in some ways resembles that of vagrants, but the difference is that they have the material and symbolic resources to survive, because they occupy and maintain a specific space. Here, all migrant workers share the same identity. No one will criticise another for not working, nor indeed would anyone care. These young people often refer to themselves, and are referred to by others, as being “from Sanhe” or “of Sanhe”.⁸⁸ In this case, subjectivation means marginalisation, and exit is the only option. As they do not directly voice their opinions, and rarely express their opinions on the social media, it is up to researchers and journalists to give them a voice.

It is therefore evident that the capacity to work little, or only occasionally, or not at all, and the possibility of avoiding taking responsibility, limiting work pressures, and enjoying life, depend

⁸⁵ Interviews, scholars, China, 2023-2025.

⁸⁶ Interview, entrepreneur, 2024.

⁸⁷ Interviews with two migrant workers, 2025.

⁸⁸ Tian and Lin, 2020; Zhang, 2020, 62-69; Ding, 2023, 77-80.

on individuals but also on social status, as defined by multiple criteria. Some of the most important factors are an individual's economic, social, and cultural capital; their educational background, the quality of their personal network, and the nature of their relations with their parents. The level of support that individuals might receive from their parents depends on the latter's financial capacity and their willingness to support their child, but also on the nature of the emotional relationship. Here we are far from the unconditional moral injunction of filial piety. When the conditions, particularly in terms of power relations, that support a value disappear, that value has little chance of survival.⁸⁹ After 1949, the modernisation of Chinese society (including collectivisation in the countryside) left a large margin of manoeuvre for individuals to decide how to manage family relations. More recently, migration from the countryside has reshaped intra-family relations, while the emergence of the middle class and shrinking family sizes have created a completely new situation.

SO, HOW DO YOU LIE FLAT?

Interviews and social media posts do not give instructions on how to lie flat, or draw a line between lying flat and not lying flat. It seems that anyone can decide how they want to lie flat, which can lead to strange developments. Despite negative reactions from institutions and public figures, these buzzwords have rapidly become fashionable, revealing the scale of the phenomenon. Terms such as *Diaosi* or *Sang* have been used by companies in their marketing. In the case of *Diaosi*, Xi Jinping's speeches in 2013 contributed to the decline of the movement, but this was not the case of *Sang* or *Tangping* which continued to flourish despite official criticism and censorship. An anonymous text, titled the "Tangpingist Manifesto", ironically mentions the existence of an "honourable Tangpingism", referring to a form of hedonism based on material abundance. In this case, the Tangpingists are young people from the upper classes, for whom *Tangping* is the lifestyle of rich people.⁹⁰

At the opposite extreme, for some people *Tangping* involves a radical change in their lives. Some go to live in the countryside, or change careers – for example, becoming a psychologist after studying physics.⁹¹ Some move to Northeast China, where it is cheaper to buy or rent an apartment, and do e-commerce activities. Some decide to stay abroad after graduation. Sometimes, people change one aspect of their lives – for example, joining a zero-waste movement and consuming less.⁹²

For most people, however, *Tangping* seems to be more a state of mind than a set of precise practices to follow. To quantify the proportion of *Tangping* "supporters" among students, Peng Jun and Yu Tao conducted a survey of 9,305 students from 23 higher education institutions. 87% of the students have "*Tangping* behaviours" (*cunzai tangping xingwei*, 存在躺平行为), but

⁸⁹ Geertz, 1973. When it comes to their relations with their parents, interviewees never refer to filial piety. What counts is... their relations with their parents. Three examples: one informant told me that she was happy to go back home and was made very welcome; another said that she was not happy to go back and was depressed, and that her initially happy parents later became less so; the third informant said that she was happy to go back, but that the cohabitation turned very bad after a while. Interviews, France and China, 2023-2025.

⁹⁰ Anonymous Tangpingist, 2022.

⁹¹ This is a true example taken from an interviewee, Beijing, October 2024.

⁹² Interviews, China and France, 2023-2025.

only 3% have chosen “to *Tangping* in person (directly)” (*xuanze zhijie tangping*, 选择直接躺平), which seems to mean making a change to their lives. The majority of students consider that they *Tangping* 10-15 hours a week,⁹³ which seems to correspond roughly with the leisure time available to a student. In this context, *Tangping* seems to signify taking more time for oneself, finding a less stressful job, relaxing and having a good time, and otherwise finding a way to participate in this trendy movement. Some acknowledge that *Tangping* does not challenge the social system, but rather represents a sensible way of dealing with work in a modern society, and – in line with the perspective of the interviewees who had studied in France – a “civilised approach” to work such as is found in Europe.⁹⁴

As with the zero-waste movement,⁹⁵ adopting a lying flat lifestyle, pretending to lie flat, or talking positively about it can also be seen as a means of distinction. In contrast, both obsessive consumption and working hard are identified as characteristics of the previous generation, and are therefore perceived as old-fashioned and steeped in tradition.

Few middle-class young people adopt radical practices in the workplace, engage in processes of marginalisation, or voice their discontent. It is undoubtedly necessary to introduce here the third term used by Hirschman to analyse the expression of discontent, namely “loyalty”. Members of the middle class voice their concerns without proposing an alternative social model. For example, they may create new lifestyles but without questioning social stratification and inequalities. Consuming less, struggling less, and taking less responsibility does not necessarily entail being disloyal to the social system. Similarly, some people would like to lie flat but cannot do so because they feel “responsible” for their family. I interviewed several students and young graduates who told me that, coming from relatively poor families, they had no choice but to succeed or at least struggle for the chance to do so, as their whole family were depending on them. “It is a question of responsibility.”⁹⁶

HOW TO OVERCOME TANGPING: ACADEMIC RESPONSES

In Foucault’s words, the subject is not only “tied to his own identity by a conscience of self-knowledge”, but he is also the object of “a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.”⁹⁷ In other words, the way society understands and responds to *Tangping* contributes to the framing of the phenomenon.

Everyone seems to agree that, while there are negative consequences to young people seeking escapism, such people should be treated with leniency... by turning them into victims. But what means are available to overcome the phenomenon, or at least to eliminate its negative aspects?

A divergence has emerged between scholars from departments of social sciences and researchers working in Party schools or departments of Marxism-Leninism, although in some publications the difference is not so pronounced. Firstly, while the former are more

⁹³ Peng and Yu, 2023, 174-181.

⁹⁴ Interviews, France, 2023-2025.

⁹⁵ As we can see in Lu, 2024, 1-23; Zhan, 2024, 1019-1040.

⁹⁶ Interviews, 2022-2025.

⁹⁷ Foucault, 1982, 777-795, 781.

concerned by both negative and positive aspects of *Tangping*, the latter viewed it mainly as a negative phenomenon. Secondly, whereas researchers from social sciences departments focus more on the need to adopt new policies and regulations in order to change socio-economic structures – for example, by reforming the labour market, easing competition, and changing the management systems in public administration and companies – scholars from departments of Marxism-Leninism or Party schools mainly advocate for providing psychological and ideological support, as well as local policies in favour of young people, but they do not envisage a significant change in policy.

Nobody proposes any repression of those who practise lying flat. However, there was a significant case involving a law professor and Party member named Su.⁹⁸ During an inspection, his statements in class were “officially reprimanded”. The publicity surrounding the case shows that the Party wanted to make it a test case for other potential incidents. Su was accused of advocating *Tangping*, *Bailan*, and nihilism (*xuwuzhuyi*, 虚无主义). It was remarked in Chinese media that Su:

Worked his way up from being a farmer’s son to becoming a senior intellectual and a legal scholar. His difficult upbringing led him to develop an aloof and nonconformist personality, and he consistently spoke his mind bluntly, even exhibiting extreme and unorthodox views and behaviour [...]. In his classroom teaching, while generally maintaining alignment with the Central Committee on major principles, Su repeatedly advocated and promoted concepts such as “lying flat” [...] or propagated historical nihilism. Despite facing student complaints and repeated discussions with the Academic Affairs Office, he persisted in his conduct.⁹⁹

The debate focused on whether his behaviour should be treated as a disciplinary offence. Some people believed his attitude stemmed from his personal background, character, and disposition, and that he should therefore be forgiven. However, according to a publishing house affiliated with the Party Central Commission for Discipline Inspection and the National Supervisory Commission, it was deemed that his remarks constituted a violation of political discipline regulations, and that he therefore had to be disciplined:

As a university lecturer, he should have prioritised cultivating a healthy and positive mindset alongside professional competence after assuming his teaching role. Instead of promoting views incompatible with the image of youth in the new era, such as “lying flat” [...], he should have guided students to avoid negative influences on their emotions and conduct, fostering a positive outlook.¹⁰⁰

As far as we know, Su did not face any criminal sanctions. The way the case was handled suggests that those responsible for suppressing dissenting opinions have a relatively benevolent view of *Tangping*, and the Party itself does not seem to view *Tangping* as a significant political threat. Furthermore, Su’s attitude was partially excused by the fact that he comes from a poor family. The lesson for other professors seems to be that, although lying flat is not a dissident attitude, they should not show too much support for it.

⁹⁸ Xu, 2024.

⁹⁹ *Guanchazhe*, 2024.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Social scientists play a role in introducing new debates into Chinese society, for example about the balance between work and competition on the one hand, and leisure, family, and personal life on the other. According to Mi Shuxian, “lying flat youth have become a mirror image of contemporary youth, reflecting the mental changes experienced by young people amid the torrent of social transformation”. These young people “are gradually returning to emotional responsibilities, rediscovering the value of family emotions, and attaining a sense of life beyond production”.¹⁰¹

An Lili, Tian Ye and Wang Jingying consider that *Tangping* is a positive attitude of adaptation to new social conditions:

[*Tangping*] also has positive effects such as regulating the body and mind, strengthening subject consciousness, and promoting healthy competition. It also plays an important role in helping university students cope with individual difficulties and social pressure. In fact, “lying flat” is a double-edged sword. University educators should [...] enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of ideological and political education, and take advantage of the situation by providing positive guidance about values in a form that appeals to young people.¹⁰²

Another article states that:

Teaching and guidance based on the balance-adaptation principle and the relationship between goals and inputs can mobilise the dynamic aspects of *Tangping* and dissolve its inertial aspects, helping university students to develop a positive social mentality and cope with increasing social competitive pressure.¹⁰³

Wu Ying and Sun Weihang suggest that:

In the face of this globally prevalent social phenomenon, we should recognize the reasonableness of the phenomenon of “low-desire” among young people. We should both create a relaxed and harmonious social environment in order to avoid social alienation, and strengthen the social and emotional development of young people. This can be achieved by linking the government, the media, the family, and the individual to help young people to rise up from lying flat.¹⁰⁴

Li Tong goes further, arguing that income distribution inequity is at the core of “lying flat”. “Therefore, in response to the phenomenon of ‘lying flat’ and ‘rat race’, the relevant mitigation path is: First, reduce the gap between rich and poor, improve the mobility of the stratum; Second, increase employment opportunities and broaden promotion channels; Third, the social structural dilemma should be solved from the institutional level”.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, Lin Longfei and Gao Yanxue argue that young people should be the focus of appropriate social policies and social services, such as vocational training, lifelong education, urban-rural integration, regulation of the gig economy, and enhanced labour protections. They consider that it is the government’s responsibility to reduce the negative influence of

¹⁰¹ Mi, 2025, 108-115, 110.

¹⁰² An *et al.*, 2023, 89-100, 92.

¹⁰³ Yang and Mu, 2024, 109-117.

¹⁰⁴ Wu and Sun, 2024, 9-25.

¹⁰⁵ Li, 2023, 116-120.

Tangping culture, by solving the social problems faced by young people. Housing prices in cities, especially in megacities and first- and second-tier cities, must be reduced. Public rental housing policies for young people must be promoted, and the threshold for rural residents to purchase properties in cities must be lowered significantly. Social security for young people should be strengthened, the labour market improved, the gap between urban and rural areas reduced, household registration reform sped up, and the minimum wage for young people increased.¹⁰⁶

Scholars associated with Party schools or Marxism-Leninism departments do not consider that the government has no responsibility in the matter. For example, they advocate for increasing job opportunities for young people. However, they mainly emphasise the importance of increasing psychological and ideological work with young people.

Geng Rui, a researcher from the Institute of Ideological and Political Education at Northeast Normal University considers *Tangping* to be a multidimensional phenomenon, arising from both objective factors, such as class solidification and involution, and subjective factors, such as the conflicts inherent to modern society, including those between immediacy and latency, work and leisure, and an “excess of subjectivity” (*zhutixing guosheng*, 主体性过剩). Consequently, society must work together to help young people in forming a “correct outlook on life”.¹⁰⁷ According to him, this “excessive subjectivity” is an “inevitable by-product of the self-replication and expansion of data capital [*shuju ziben*, 数据资本]. Data capital cultivates an illusion of sensory supremacy by glorifying subjectivity, leading individuals to venerate the logic of capital in their autonomous choices.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, we are faced here with a reactivation of the usual association between capitalism and “unleashed” subjectivity, as asserted by orthodox Marxism. From this perspective, *Tangping* is still viewed as a hedonistic, egotistical, and ultra-individualistic phenomenon.

Another article advocates for more voluntarist action. It provides details on how a “struggle culture” (*fendou wenhua*, 奋斗文化) is being instilled in Longhua youth in order to eradicate the “culture of ‘Sanhe dashen’”.¹⁰⁹ According to the two authors, it is “thanks to economic development that Longhua has been transformed from a ‘dirty and messy area’ into a ‘clean, rich, and beautiful’ area”.¹¹⁰ This achievement could be put in jeopardy by the negative culture of *Sanhe dashen*. The problem is analysed as an imbalance between cultural supply and demand, leading to the development of a decadent culture. To eliminate this danger, “the district Party committee has used a top-down approach to organise various activities for young workers at the grassroots level” (especially workers for the company Foxconn). Once again, the authors of this article mobilise revolutionary discourse and the “political movement” approach. In July 2020, the Party committee and the local party school started studying the Sanhe gods culture, and in September they undertook the construction of youth culture at the grassroots level. Young workers, for example, are striving to demonstrate their altruistic fighting spirit, realise their personal and professional potential, and ultimately promote personal growth and business development.

¹⁰⁶ Lin and Gao, 2021, 78-84.

¹⁰⁷ Geng, 2023, 175-181.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 175-181, 179.

¹⁰⁹ Liu and Zhang, 2021, 19-22.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-22, 19.

The article does not overlook socio-economic structures when explaining the emergence of a decadent culture: “Low-end industrial workers are economically vulnerable and can easily become part of the ‘Sanhe gods’ group. Conversely, strategic emerging industries, advanced manufacturing, and high-end service industries are the economic basis for struggle culture”.¹¹¹ But, the authors therefore argue that the influence of the subculture can be mitigated by improving and modernising the economic model, rather than by fundamentally changing it. Other scholars consider that the authorities must improve the quality of psychological education for young people on a larger scale, and actively eliminate potential psychological risks in many aspects of social life. Colleges and universities should fully understand the importance of strengthening mental health education for young people and integrating mental health education into the work system, and establishing specialized work institutions for mental health education, psychological counselling, or consultation. According to them, it is necessary to deepen the practice and cultivation of mainstream values among young people, guide the formation of positive values, cultivate the capacities of young people to overcome problems and work hard, and improve their ability to cope with setbacks.¹¹² According to Lin Feng, it is important “to strengthen the construction of cyberspace culture and cultural governance in accordance with the law” but also to take into consideration the interest of young people “in education, employment and housing”.¹¹³ Conversely, some voices openly advocate an extremely individualistic approach, based on self-help and personal development techniques. Young people must be considered as being responsible for their own problems. They must take charge of their own lives and transform themselves. Two professors of Marxism-Leninism, Zhang Jing and Song Xiaohong, contend that the prevalence of *Bailan* is due to the inability of young people to properly deal with the many pain-pleasure contradictions that they face: “They fail to understand the dialectical relationship between pain and pleasure and lack guidance on maintaining a positive and optimistic attitude towards them.” The authors cite a survey in which 70% of students said that eating, drinking, and playing were the most enjoyable activities, and only 10% said that rejuvenating the Chinese nation was the duty of those who are ambitious and talented. “They prioritise immediate pleasure and are afraid of making choices that would require long-term effort”. 42% believe that “life is short, enjoy it while you can”.¹¹⁴ To address this issue, the two authors advocate the use of positive psychology. They mention Barbara Frederickson, who, in their words, “believes that positive emotional experiences can expand an individual’s cognitive thinking and behavioural capacity, as well as building and enhancing their physical, cognitive, psychological, and social resources”. Fredrickson published an article with Marcial Losada (a business consultant) in which she claimed to be able to calculate a mathematical ratio which can distinguish those who flourish and those who do not

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2021, 19-22, 21.

¹¹² Li and Shang, 2024, 119-128.

¹¹³ Lin, 2023, 142-149.

¹¹⁴ Zhang and Song, 2024, 116-123, 119.

flourish in life.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, however, “the Mathematics of Happiness turn[ed] out to be a Fraud”,¹¹⁶ and the authors withdrew the mathematics behind the theory.¹¹⁷

The authors also refer to the “positive personality model” proposed by psychologists Jordan Peterson and Martin Seligman, which, they say, highlights “that cultivating positive personality traits is an important way to develop good moral character”. Seligman is a very famous, and also very controversial psychologist,¹¹⁸ while Peterson has been accused of defending far-right extremist views.¹¹⁹ Peng Jun and Yu Tao also recommend drawing on Seligman’s work to help students.¹²⁰

In summary, scholars have variously adopted three quite divergent approaches to combating the alleged negative aspects of new cultural trends. Some scholars refer to “political movement”-style actions. These political movements, used extensively in pre-reform China, mobilised the whole of society to target a problem or a group of people. A second approach is that of deeply reforming the economic and education systems in order to change the environment in which young people grow up. The third approach consists in introducing psychological techniques to re-motivate young people. The choice of techniques is surprising, as they draw on schools of thought that are associated with neoliberal conceptions (and sometimes far right theories) that consider social problems to be rooted in the flaws of individuals.

NEW POLICIES, FEW IMPACTS

Are these debates leading to concrete policies aimed at changing the social environment? Official discourse highlights that the creation of job opportunities for young people is one of the government’s key objectives. For example, the Ministry of Education published a “Notice of the General Office of the Ministry of Education” regarding the launch of the “100-Day Sprint” campaign, which promoted the employment of university graduates in 2023. According to the “Notice”, this campaign would “focus on overcoming the main obstacles to employment, accurately matching job seekers with vacancies, optimising guidance services, and encouraging graduates to seek jobs proactively”. The aim was to help more university graduates to find employment before and after graduation, and to strive to promote high-quality and full employment for university graduates in 2023.¹²¹ In 2024, the General Office of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security issued a notice regarding the 2024 Youth Employment Service Campaign for University Graduates and Other Youths, targeting two particular groups. The first group was made up of unemployed university graduates from the 2024 cohort, and the second comprised unemployed young people registered with the human resources

¹¹⁵ Fredrickson and Losada, 2005.

¹¹⁶ Lane, 2014.

¹¹⁷ Fredrickson and Losada, 2013.

¹¹⁸ Konnikova, 2015.

¹¹⁹ Zhang and Song, 2024, 116-123.

¹²⁰ Peng and Yu, 2023, 174-181.

¹²¹ Chinese Ministry of Education, 2023, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A15/s3265/202305/t20230515_1059728.html, last accessed 13 September 2025.

and social security departments, which included members of previous cohorts of university graduates and also other young people aged 16-24.¹²²

According to various sources in China, these initiatives have had very little impact. The urban unemployment rate (excluding students) for those aged 16 to 24 reached 21.3% in mid-2023. The National Bureau of Statistics stopped reporting data over a five-month period, and then began again but using a different method of calculation. In this new data series, the rate was 16.9% in February 2025 and reached 18.9% in August 2025.¹²³ Many people in China estimate that at least 25-30% of young people are unemployed. Young migrant workers continue to struggle to find employment, and the number of graduates from second- or third-rank universities who work in the delivery sector, do odd jobs, live with their parents or make a living by selling all kinds of things online are constantly increasing.¹²⁴

Another area of focus is that of birth policies. According to official discourse, “generous childcare subsidies have been reported across China as part of the country’s holistic efforts to boost birth rates, making news headlines and sparking heated discussions.”¹²⁵ It was reported in September 2025 that:

Hohhot, the capital of China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, announced that it will offer couples having their first child a one-time subsidy of 10,000 yuan [approximately €1200]. A second child will receive 10,000 yuan per year until he/she reaches the age of five. For a third child or more, the annual subsidy is 10,000 yuan until the child turns 10, with the total amount reaching 100,000 yuan. It is a relatively high amount compared to other cities, and roughly twice the annual income of local citizens.¹²⁶

In line with the proposals of some scholars, Chinese authorities want to gain closer control of internet use. On 22 September 2025, the *People’s Daily* published an article titled “The Cyberspace Administration of China has launched a special campaign called ‘Clear and Bright’: Curbing Malicious Incitement of Negative Sentiment”. *Tangping* and *Bailan* are not mentioned specifically, and the target is identified as the “excessive” (*guodu*, 过度) expression of negative sentiments.¹²⁷ In other words, just as in the case of Professor Su, it is not permitted to show “excessive” support for the cultural turn.

There is no sign of an ambitious campaign to combat *Tangping*. However, an approach consists in identifying young people suffering from mental health issues. Universities have reinforced their supervision of students’ mental health. Each class of 20–30 students has an instructor (*fudaoyuan*, 辅导员) who is responsible for ideological and political education, daily management of students, career guidance, mental health support, and the development of students within the Party and the Youth League. These staff have now been instructed to pay particular attention to students who appear to have psychological problems. If there is any doubt regarding a student’s mental health, the instructor must contact professors and the

¹²² Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/202407/content_6962886.htm, last accessed 13 September 2025.

¹²³ Wu, 2025.

¹²⁴ Fieldwork, China, 2024-2025.

¹²⁵ The State Council Information Centre, http://english.scio.gov.cn/chinavoices/2025-03/17/content_117769839.html, last accessed 13 September 2025.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Renmin Ribao* (*People’s Daily*), 2025.

parents to find a solution. This supervision is made more effective by the instructors' close relationship with the students. Sometimes, an older student is appointed to oversee students' mental health. In certain schools, a teacher is appointed as a psychological advisor (*xinli zixun*, 心理咨询). Generally speaking, the role of the family is considered particularly important. Communication between parents, children and professors is strongly emphasised, even when the latter are university students.

Grassroots institutions, such as residents' committees (*juweihui*, 居委会) and communities (*shequ*, 社区), also play a role in addressing youth issues. The municipal administration puts a lot of pressure on these institutions to prove to locals that the state is looking after them. Residents approach them for help in finding jobs for their children and for help solving their health problems. Locals do not hesitate to report the ineffectiveness of local officials and social workers to municipal administration. These complaints can lead to these workers losing part of their salary or even being transferred.¹²⁸ This configuration of power, which links the governing and the governed at grassroots level, is similar to that analysed by Béatrice Hibou in the Tunisian context, who finds that these types of government policies – especially regarding the organisation of social solidarity and welfare – create processes of mutual dependence between rulers and the population.¹²⁹

CONCLUSION

According to two Chinese scholars, *Tangping* is a way to “adjust ego” (*tiaozheng ziwo*, 调整自我).¹³⁰ Surely this corresponds to Foucault's conception of *le souci de soi* (the care of the self) or *le gouvernement de soi* (the government of the self)? Subjects create themselves within a specific contingent historical context in relation to others and to institutions.

In China, many young people are both reluctant and unable to follow in their parents' footsteps. The fact is that, despite a great deal of hard work and a willingness to undergo intense pressures, it is becoming increasingly difficult to succeed in Chinese society, or even to avoid social downgrading. For many young people, the reward is no longer worth the effort.

Two generations have changed China, but in two different ways. Most members of the first generation were transformed into individuals selling themselves on the labour and social markets. However, two versions of this subject have co-existed from the outset. The first version is a “premium” category, made up of members of the new urban middle class. In order to maintain their value on the labour and matrimonial markets, they have to take care of their bodies, present the perfect image, and possess the attitudes and goods that symbolise their status and skills. The second version is the “second-rate” subject. This group is made up of migrant workers, who face fewer, but stronger, requirements: they must be obedient to the injunctions of social hierarchy, and they must be willing to consider themselves as “uncivilised” (*bu wendingde*, 不文明的) or “poor-quality” (*suzhi buhaode*, 素质不好的) persons, while also undertaking to civilise themselves. However, these two groups have something in common, which is their subjection to despotic labour relations in the workplace. Although the

¹²⁸ Interviews, 2022-2025.

¹²⁹ Hibou, 2011.

¹³⁰ Peng and Yu, 2023, 174-181.

workplaces and management styles that they encounter are different, the degree of alienation, in Marxist terms, is equivalent. The subject associated with the second generation is at odds with this picture. Although still suffering from despotic capitalist rule, young people want to decide their own lifestyle and break free from the rat race.

However, they are also the heirs of the neoliberal subject of the previous generation. Firstly, among members of this generation, lifestyles differ greatly as a result of social stratification. An individual's opportunities and the degree of power they have over their life depend heavily on whether their parents are rich, poor, or of medium income, on how much cultural and social capital their parents possess, and on the nature of their relationship with their parents.

Secondly, social stratification also affects the many ways in which individuals may participate in *Tangping*. For most middle-class young people, it is neither easy nor enjoyable to maintain the lifestyle associated with their class, and they must adapt to an increasingly difficult situation. However, the class identity inherited from their parents has not disappeared, and creates contradictions. Some Tangpingists criticise consumerism, while nonetheless relying on online commerce to survive, or becoming homeowners even if it is somewhere other than their hometown. Others do not want to have children because they feel it could be an obstacle to a brilliant career. Even young people from urban lower-middle-class backgrounds may enjoy certain public benefits, which, according to some of them, can help them to *Tangping*.¹³¹

Distinction, as defined by Bourdieu,¹³² is a core issue for young, urban, affluent middle-class people. They can *Tangping* a little, then a little more, and then eventually “stand up” again. They can show off by pretending to be *Bailan* with impunity. For them, there is little difference between real life and the virtual world of social networks. They can change their minds at any time and return to “normality”.¹³³ This is not the case for lower middle-class young people. It will remain difficult for them to get a good job, because they attended a lower-rank university and have limited social capital. They may be able to return to live with their parents, but with the feeling of “being a burden” and “of not really existing”.¹³⁴ Most parents of young migrants failed to enter the ranks of the middle classes, which makes it even more difficult for their children to attain this goal. Young migrant workers lack the necessary capital (economic, social, and cultural) to easily *Tangping*, and if they do so, they will find it hard to return to normal life.

Thirdly, there is considerable variation in how young people express their discontent. Migrant workers have few opportunities to express themselves; others speak for them. Conversely, middle-class people can express themselves through their discourse and their lifestyle choices, allowing them to adopt fluid attitudes on a wide range of subjects:¹³⁵ they question how society defines the relationship between work and leisure, or between private life and social duties, and how time is managed in personal life. In short, they question living conditions under “socialist market” rule. This kind of “discreet revolution” is bad news for the “Chinese Dream”. However, it is not necessarily directed towards political change in China, or even social change. Critics rarely question inequalities and social stratification. The consequences

¹³¹ Interviews, 2024-2025.

¹³² Bourdieu, 1984.

¹³³ Chen and Cao, 2021, 181-191; Lin and Gao, 2021, 78-84; Xu, 2021, 139-145.

¹³⁴ Interviews, China, 2023-2025.

¹³⁵ Ji and Liu, 2019, 43-55.

of *Tangping* will certainly contribute to changes in Chinese society, for example in terms of birth-rate, and attitudes towards work, family relations, marriage, sexuality and environment. However, it has led to very little discussion about what kind of society would be beneficial to the Chinese population in terms of social stratification, redistribution, and inequalities. *Tangping* could also be a sign that Chinese society is becoming partially depoliticised, with people searching for individual solutions to collective problems.

Moreover, in some respects, the concerns of the *Tangping* discourse are shared by a large number of Chinese people: even if they do not explicitly identify with *Tangping*, they may still adjust themselves to the contemporary situation in similar ways. For example, many hard-working, ambitious people in the established upper class, who are not otherwise lying flat, nonetheless refuse to marry and have children. They do so for the same reasons as Tangpingists: firstly, because having a child is expensive; secondly, because it can hinder a successful career, especially for women; and thirdly, because of wider fears for the future.¹³⁶ It is estimated that there are 240 million single young adults in China.¹³⁷ Other people, or the same, have very pragmatic opinions on the matter. Among the interviewees, several female students echoed the following sentiment: “If I find the right person ok, I’ll have a baby. If not, I won’t.”¹³⁸

Tangping can also be a form of social exit option. People who move to the countryside or to declining cities to make a living through informal jobs are effectively voting with their feet. Ironically, the anonymous author of the “Tangping Manifesto” suggests that this withdrawal could be good news in economic terms, as it could mitigate the difficulties of the current situation: more withdrawals mean fewer people on the labour market.¹³⁹ However, for most Tangpingists, the “exit” is only a partial one. Only marginalised young migrant workers, such as *Sanhe dashen*, withdraw from all aspects of society. The others continue to work and do business, albeit at a slower pace, and to consume, even if they buy organic food and recycle. Moreover, they can return to “normal” at any time.

Finally, many young Tangpingists remain “loyal”. They find their own solutions without posing any sort of challenge to power relations. In particular, middle-class young people take advantage of their privilege to live as they wish, while the children of upper-class parents pretend to lie flat as a mark of distinction.

The Chinese authorities are concerned about *Tangping*, but not because they fear that it will give rise to political trouble. Even the “Tangpingist Manifesto” acknowledges that “in order to save Tangpingism from its bind”, it is necessary to find allies such as women, workers, peasants, etc.¹⁴⁰ Otherwise there will be no chance for political change.

It does, however, reflect real uncertainties about the Chinese Dream and social control in general. The authorities have access to excellent research which concludes that some policies need to be changed or significantly improved. Some modest measures have been adopted to stimulate employment, and to make it easier for people to have babies, as well as to control ideology, but they have had little impact. Even policies aimed at promoting consumption seem

¹³⁶ Interviews, 2022-2025.

¹³⁷ Chen and Cao, 2021, 181-191.

¹³⁸ Interviews, students, 2023-2025.

¹³⁹ Anonymous Tangpingist, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Anonymous Tangpingist, 2022.

ineffective. Furthermore, the counterstrategy of strengthening ideological and psychological education using technologies of “personal development” seems inappropriate. The psychological approach to *Tangping* cannot hope to have a significant influence on the post-miracle subject, despite the current appeal of self-development psychology.¹⁴¹ The intention appears to be to create individuals who are strong, effective, and pragmatic, which is exactly what the new generation is reacting against. The misunderstanding is obvious: when young people criticise hedonism (consumerism), they are accused of being hedonists themselves, on the grounds that they are refusing to make sacrifices.

The problem is that the Chinese population can no longer be disciplined as effectively as it once could. New spaces for expressing subjectivities are now emerging, notably on social media, in social movements, and in private life. As recent criticisms and censorship of “nihilism”, “excessive subjectivity”, and “excessive negative sentiments” show, the authorities are aware that there could be dangerous consequences if a large proportion of young people will turn away from the “culture of struggle”. Although the institutions would like to struggle against *Tangping*, by focusing mainly on its “excessive” manifestations, they acknowledge their own powerlessness.

This phenomenon is not limited to *Tangping*. Even ordinary citizens are able to make similar choices in domains where there is no question of suppressing such behaviours: how can people be forced to work in a market economy (socialist or otherwise)? How can you oblige people to marry and have children? How can you force people to consume? How can you prevent people from expressing themselves on social media, given that social media has become a means for the authorities to find out what people think?¹⁴² How can academic research be controlled, when universities are tasked with understanding what is going on in China? How would it be possible to stop artists from developing tactics to circumvent censorship, when their art is used to legitimise China on the international stage, and is a source of profit?¹⁴³ In many such domains, Chinese society is creating its own spaces.

It is important to note that, as usual, while the central government sets the direction, it is the responsibility of local governments to elaborate and implement policies. This is generally an effective strategy, whereby the state’s “grid” extends its control of society through institutions at the local level.¹⁴⁴ However, grassroots institutions complain that they lack the funds to fulfil their mission. Moreover, many problems depend on macroeconomic policies that are beyond the control of local governments.

Tangping is not a rejection of Confucian values. It does appear to demonstrate that China is a modern society, with modern values; a banal society.¹⁴⁵ From this perspective, effort is no longer viewed as an unconditional value, but rather as something that should be rewarded, either materially or spiritually. The relationships between parents and children have also been imbued with new meanings. Unquestioning filial piety has been replaced by material interests, emotional relationships, and ethical considerations, as in any other modern society. Furthermore, the huge generation gap between parents and children is another evidence

¹⁴¹ Zhang, 2023.

¹⁴² Rocca, 2023; Jacoby *et al.*, 2025.

¹⁴³ Jacoby *et al.*, 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Tang, 2020.

¹⁴⁵ Rocca, 2004, 2017a.

of change. “My parents don’t understand me” is a leitmotiv of young people.¹⁴⁶ Recent developments have continued a process that has been ongoing since 1949.

Although it is beyond the scope of the present study, it would be invaluable to compare these new cultural phenomena in China with the various debates and changes across Europe that have challenged the social system since the 1960s. There are clearly many similarities, including criticism of working conditions and consumerism, the rejection of family values and marriage, and the expectation of having children (although, in both China and Europe, the family still serves as a refuge), the solidification of social classes, the desire to find one’s own path, and the determining influence of social relations, the media and, more recently, social media. For example, a large-scale study in Italy and Norway¹⁴⁷ found that young people feel unable to have a child owing to economic difficulties, and increasing general anxiety about the state of the world. Even though France has been described, by comparison with China, as a “lying flat country”, a young French sinologist wrote: “As I read about this concept [*Tangping*] for the first time in the spring of 2021, I immediately felt connected to the term as I had started lying flat after completing my PhD in Chinese Studies in 2018”.¹⁴⁸

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean-Louis Rocca is Professor at Sciences Po, Paris, and Researcher at the Center for International Studies (CERI), Sciences Po. He is currently working on Chinese society, particularly the middle class and social and cultural movements. He is the author of *The Making of the Chinese Middle Class* (2017) and *A Sociology of Modern China* (2015), and with Françoise Mengin he co-edited the collection *Politics in China: Moving Frontiers* (2002). Rocca is a member of the editorial board of *The China Quarterly*. He spent ten years in China, including six years as a professor at Tsinghua University, Beijing.

L'AUTEUR

Jean-Louis Rocca est professeur à Sciences Po Paris et chercheur au Centre d'études internationales (CERI) de Sciences Po. Il travaille actuellement sur la société chinoise, en particulier la classe moyenne et les mouvements sociaux et culturels. Il est l'auteur de *The Making of the Chinese Middle Class* (2017) et *A Sociology of Modern China* (2015), et a dirigé avec Françoise Mengin le livre *Politics in China: Moving Frontiers* (2002). Jean-Louis Rocca est membre du comité de rédaction de *The China Quarterly*. Il a passé dix ans en Chine, dont six ans en tant que professeur à l'université Tsinghua de Pékin.

¹⁴⁶ Interviews, students 2022-2025.

¹⁴⁷ Dunne, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Brossard, 2025, 48-56, 48.

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